

The Student-Writer

A Little Talk Every Month with Those
Interested in the Technique of Literature.

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"TWICE-TOLD TALES"

AN EDITOR, in returning a story to an author, sent him this advice:

"You had better put this story away for six months or so, until it acquires a punch."

The author did as advised. Six months afterward, he took the manuscript from its resting-place. For a dozen pages he found that in his eyes it read as smoothly and entertainingly as the average magazine tale. Then it suddenly seemed to swerve from the straight track of narration.

"Ah," said the author, "now I see what is wrong."

And forthwith he proceeded to correct the error. The correction included the entire rewriting of the story from the point where it had seemed to swerve. It made necessary an entirely different ending. The manuscript went forth again, and the editor who had previously rejected it because it lacked the "punch" sent a generous check in return.

Another editor rejected a story with this comment:

"I can't tell you what is wrong with it. But it seems too mechanical. All the characters are in place, but they lack life. The story hasn't the punch, although I can't exactly explain why."

Doubtless the editor might have been able to specify the trouble if he had had time. Editors are busy persons. Now and then they take pains to analyze a story and diagnose its weaknesses; more often they merely complain that it lacks "punch," and leave the author to figure it out for himself.

Frequently the student-writer is surprised to learn how closely he can approximate the editorial viewpoint by laying aside a story for a considerable time and then rereading it. To cite a case in point: A young author had been unable with persistent submissions to place a short-story that had seemed to him, when he wrote it, a veritable "masterpiece" of its kind. For several months it gathered dust on his shelves, then one day he drew it forth and began to read.

It was as if he were reading the work of a stranger. He had

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assumed the editorial viewpoint, and in all impartiality he found himself exclaiming: "This is good stuff!" Why had the magazines passed it by?

About two-thirds of the way through, he discovered why. He felt the jarring note that had doubtless influenced most of the rejections.

The story was that of a disgruntled criminal who was "sore" because he had been put through that species of torture known as the "third degree," in an effort to elicit confession of a crime he had not committed. He swore to square the account with the police chief, who had superintended the torture.

His plans were laid with cunning and consummate skill. He went to another city and allowed his beard to grow. For months he practiced a limp, until it became as natural as his proper brisk step. He even changed his voice. Then he took quarters in a house not far from the home of the chief he had sworn to kill, and cultivated the acquaintance and friendship of the kindly neighbors and their children.

He chose a dark night for his intended crime. Behind a hedge that separated the front yard of the police chief from the street, he crouched and waited. He had been careful to acquaint himself with the fact that the chief was a widower, and that his housekeeper was an old woman, half deaf, who slept in an upper room.

Presently the chief came along and entered the front gate. The lurker stole from his ambush, stepped up behind his victim, and felled him by a blow on the back of the head. Then he dragged the inanimate body up to the front porch, where he searched it for keys. A moment later he had opened the front door, conveyed his burden within, slammed the door, and prepared for the last act of the drama.

Up to this point the tale had moved convincingly. It was not the author's purpose to permit the criminal to kill the policeman; so he introduced a little girl—the child of the chief—who appeared on the scene in time to divert the criminal from his intention.

Just here was the jarring note. It came from the introduction of this child. The editor, in rejecting the story, had merely stated that it hadn't the "punch"—but the author now knew why. He had made the mistake of employing an outside agency as the deterring factor.

When the tale went back, revamped, the little girl had disappeared. The criminal was ready to shoot the prostrate man. He had gloated over what he intended to do. The chief had recovered consciousness and was watching. The gun was raised, the muzzle trained on the victim, the hammer drawn back, a finger on the trigger.

And then—the threatening muzzle was lowered. The would-be murderer uttered an oath.

"D—n it! I can't!" he snarled. "I can't do it. I haven't got th' guts!"

This time the story brought a check from the same editor who had previously rejected it. The substitution of an internal for an external agency of interference with the crook's intention had switched the train back on the narrational track.

All writers have rejected manuscripts lying about. Many of them would be salable if properly diagnosed and treated.

Good farmers know the value of plowing "summer fallow." The plow turns over the soil, which is then permitted to remain exposed throughout the summer months, and perhaps through the following winter. In the spring it will have absorbed new life and energy. A vigorous crop results.

A story will often do likewise.

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THE SHAM MARKET

By Bill Rendered.

NEVER was there a better market for magazine fillers than at the present time. The Smart Set, I think, claims to be the originator of them for the general magazines, but now the idea is in such general favor that dozens of periodicals fill out their pages with bits of clever humor or true-to-life fragments of philosophy. The humorous weeklies, of course, and Town Topics, have always offered a liberal market for short material clever enough to pass with their editors.

Speaking from the experience of one who has sold over two thousand jokes, verses and short sketches, I should say that the old-style brand of slap-stick humor is absolutely unsalable. Humor depending upon forced or "made" situations does not sell. Sketches which portray life as it is with novelty and "punch" will find a ready market. Old-idea stuff that has been worked to death has no chance at all.

In most short contributions the "kick" or "punch" is in the last line. It "jolts" the reader and makes him think, even if he doesn't laugh. Perhaps he doesn't laugh because the point landed pretty near home. Many persons five thousand miles from the author have a feeling that he must know them and be able to read their minds in order to write such a sketch, when in reality the character in the sketch merely stands for a certain type or class. A keen ear, a little insight, and close observation furnish the material for sketches that show life with the camouflage off. The sham and whitewash, indeed, provide the basis for the sketch.

Nothing is more amusing than persons who think themselves infallible. They are the kind of folks that make the best material for humor. They are almost continually saying and doing things that can be utilized for sketches and fiction.

Shams, shams, shams! they are everywhere. Tiny, little, medium and big, they are found sticking out in every social gathering, in every club, in every place where people assemble. They have furnished the material for thousands of stories and sketches and will continue to do so world without end. Study shams, learn to read them at a glance, contrive them into little "packages of words," put in the "punch" at the end that leaves the sham quivering and bare, exposed to the eyes of the reader in all its ludicrous nakedness, and you have a piece of literature in miniature.

I have turned a good many shams into checks myself. I once knew a minister whose sermons on right-doing brought tears from his congregation. One day they couldn't find him, neither could they find a fair young parishioner. Weeks later he wrote back concerning her who went with him: "In my hour of need she was my golden

star of guidance." No one knew what he meant, but it didn't sound very complimentary to the wife he left behind. From this idea I wrote a sketch in which a reformer preached to young men and women. One night the reformer failed to show up for a meeting and some of his converts, thinking he had gone elsewhere to convert sinners, acted as they felt he would want them to act, and raided a "red-light" district. That's where they found the reformer—in his pink nightie! I called this *The Boomerang*, and it sold to *Snappy Stories*.

I once knew a girl who used the word "friend" very freely. She would call people "friend," shake their hands, and appear so sincere about it that it warmed the hearts of those she thus addressed. She was very polite and considerate when they were present. But in the absence of these "friends" she entertained her listeners at their expense, her remarks being as uncomplimentary behind their backs as they were flattering to their faces. From this I wrote many sketches, all different in theme. One dealt with a man and a girl. The man loved the girl because of what she made herself appear when they were together. He heard her later holding him up as the prince of fools to an interested circle, when she thought he was far away.

He kept the two memories apart, one for a girl he knew at first, the other for a girl he knew later. In his mind the first girl was dead, but he had the beautiful memory of her. The other girl, who gave him the unpleasant memory, lived to torture him because she had the face of the girl that was dead. I called this "*Gold and Dross*," and it sold to *Town Topics*.

The sham of money has been used so many times in stories and

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sketches that it is the best known of all shams as a check-gatherer, and it still goes with a new twist.

One of the best tales I ever read on this was in one of the Munsey publications, about a young man who took a drop too much and got himself engaged to three girls in one evening. He was wealthy. The next morning, quite sober, he had a dull recollection of what he had done, which was made clearer by the merry jangling of the telephone when the girls started calling him up, neither knowing that he had engaged himself to the others.

In his great difficulty he sought a friend, and the friend caused a "scare head" to appear in the papers, to the effect that the fellow had lost all his money in a big failure. The delicate way in which the girls broke the engagements was very amusing.

A young fellow told a joke to a certain girl in a gathering at which I was present. It wasn't a Sunday-school joke, yet it was far from risqué, in the present meaning of the word. But the girl's face froze instantly, the room became hushed, somebody gave an embarrassed cough, and the young man in question turned all the colors of the rainbow. Later a "friend" of this girl's had a falling-out with her because she wasn't invited to a party or something of that sort, and she said to me: "Wasn't it awful the way Myrtle made poor Johnny feel when he told that silly joke? You ought to have heard her laugh about it to me! She thought the joke was dreadfully stupid, but she said she was just bursting inside at the sight of his face. You ought to hear some of the stories that Myrtle has told to us girls!" I wrote this almost as it took place. I had the man tell the joke to the girl, had her face freeze, and had him later learn that she laughed till the tears rolled down her cheeks, not at the point of the joke, but because he thought he had shocked her. This was called "The Joke" and it sold to the Parisienne.

I could fill a hundred pages with other shams that I have turned into checks, but I hope these will serve to illustrate in some small measure the way the thing is done. Sometimes the sham gives only a basic idea. Another twist must be invented, to get the "punch." Things that are very human will sell, and many shams are very, very human. Only last night I told a hostess that I had enjoyed myself exceedingly, when in reality I was bored to death the whole evening. So were most of the others present, for they told me so, but we all shammed to uphold politeness. Today I'm turning it into a check!

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DEPICTING THE OBVIOUS

BY TORREY CONNOR.

IF YOU wish to finger nice, crisp checks, instead of rejection slips, you'll see to it that your characters do the "obvious" thing. You think you are wonderfully clever when you use scholarly language in your dialogues, forgetting that when the heart is filled with emotions the mouth is rarely filled with words. How do I know that you think you are clever? I used to feel that way myself. In the days of my inexperience, the heroine inevitably would say: "The flower is of cerulean hue." She meant to convey the impression that it was blue.

If you will let this fact beat into your consciousness, you may some day sit among the giants: The hardest thing in the world, the thing for which you should daily, hourly strive, *is to be simple, direct*. To be natural, to depict the "obvious" in character, "to hold the mirror up to nature" is the highest literary art.

No, I do not care to read of the exotic lady who killed herself for obscure reasons which don't concern me greatly. I'd like to read about the jolly fat man next door, who persists in wearing plaids. The editor knows it—knows I'll like him—grabs him. When it's all summed up, if you have created a real character, your fat man may rank with Cobb's (there is only one Cobb to date) creations; or you may find yourself in print as frequently as does Peter B. Kyne.

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